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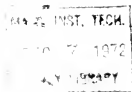


Observations on the Making of Policemen

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This research was supported in part by the Organizational Behavior Research Center at the University of California, Irvine. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the generous cooperation and support of men like M.C., Bill, Dave, Doug and George, who, like myself, learned what it means to live by the police culture. Their integrity, honesty and defiance of popular stereotypes made this study a most enlightening and enjoyable experience. Also, I would like to thank my academic colleagues, in particular, Robert Dubin, Lyman W. Porter, Edgar H. Schein and Mason Haire for their insightful suggestions and assistance during various phases of this research.

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### Abstract

The process of organizational socialization is examined in a large, urban police department. This interpenetration and eventual fusion by which persons acquire the motives, sentiments and behavioral patterns of the occupational culture is viewed from the perspective of the novitiates "breaking-in" to a police department. The development of a community of purpose and action among the police recruits is characterized as a four-phase socialization process. The phases are labelled choice, introduction, encounter and metamorphosis and, while only analytically distinct, serve as useful markers for describing the route traversed by recruits. The results of the newcomers' early police experiences and adventures are cast in terms of the common culture shared by police officers. Progress along the socialization continuum is seen as the gradual incorporation of an "in the same boat" collective consciousness stressing a "don't make waves" occupational philosophy.



### OBSERVATIONS ON THE MAKING OF POLICEMEN

In recent years the so-called "police problem" has become one of the more institutionalized topics of routine conversation in this society. Regardless whether one views the police as friend or foe, virtually everyone has a set of "cop stories" to relate to willing listeners. Although most stories dramatize personal encounters and are situationally specific, there is a common thread running through these frequently heard accounts. Indeed, in such stories the police are almost always depicted as a homogenous occupational grouping somehow quite different than most other men.

Occupational stereotyping is, of course, not unknown. Professors, taxi-cab drivers, used car salesmen, corporate executives all have mythological counterparts in the popular culture. Yet, what is of interest here is the recognition by the police themselves of the implied differences. In the words of one knowledgeable observer, a Chief of Police:

"The day the new recruit walks through the doors of the police academy, he leaves society behind to enter a profession that does more than give him a job, it defines who he is. For all the years he remains, closed into the sphere of its rituals. . . he will



be a cop." (Ahern, 1972: 3)

Policemen generally view themselves as performing society's dirty work. As such, a gap is created between the police and the public. Today's patrolman feels cut off from the mainstream culture and unfairly stigmatized. In short, when the policemen dons his uniform, he enters a distinct subculture governed by norms and values designed to manage strain created by his "outsider" role in the community.<sup>1</sup> Consider the similarity between the following passages, the first from a patrolman, the second from a jazz musician:

"The problem with this job is the goddamn public.

It really don't matter much whether you're a good cop or a bad one 'cause the people out there are so stupid that they'd never know the difference anyway. Say, for instance, you make a good pinch ...well, the good citizens' just figure you're doing your job, no big deal. But watch 'em put up a howl when you don't catch some asshole. No matter what you do, you can't win."<sup>2</sup>

"...If your working on a commercial band, they like it and so you have to play more corn. If you're working on a good band, then they don't like it, and that's a drag. If you're working on a good band and they like it, then that's a drag too. You hate them anyway, because you know that they don't know



what it's all about. They're just a big drag".

(see Becker, 1963: 91)

The themes of these two passages reflect unquestionably the viewpoint of an "outsider". Both view their audience as unknowing and both seem to have cut the cord which would bind them to the audience with whom they must interact.

In the case of the police, patrolmen are required to organize their activities within a frame of reference characterized by ambiguous legal standards, contradictory departmental regulations, overt hostility, low status, high societal visibility and demands for efficiency. It should not be surprising that policemen in general have assumed many of the characteristics of "outsiders": isolationism, secrecy, strong in-group loyalties, sacred symbols, common language and a sense of estrangement from the larger society. These subcultural features underpin a set of common understandings among police which govern their relations with one another as well as with "civilians". For example, the "no rat rule" protecting "brother" officers is virtually a commonsensical assumption guiding behavior within the police culture (Westley, 1951).

To classify the police as "outsiders" helps us to focus on several important things: the distinctive social definitions used by persons belonging to such marginal subcultures (e.g., "everybody hates a cop"); the "outsider's" methods for managing the tension created by his social position (e.g., "always protect brother officers"); and the





explicit delineation of the everyday standards of conduct followed by the "outsider" (e.g., "lay low and avoid trouble"). Furthermore, such a perspective forces a researcher to delve deeply into the sub-culture in order to see clearly through the eyes of the studied "other".

If one takes seriously research findings regarding esoteric sub-cultures, social scientists' interested in police behavior are somewhat limited in their choice of methodological strategy. The direct approach will not work because the police, like other "outsider" groupings, have developed sophisticated coping mechanisms designed to present a certain front to the non-police world. To manipulate their public front, police departments have developed both formal and informal strategies such as: special interface divisions like "community relations" or "public information"; special events such as the "Officer Friendly" programs in the public schools or citizen "ride along" programs; extreme bureaucratic red-tape; and, of course, the overt hostility displayed by police in general to the critical questioner. Consequently, if we are to gain insight into the so-called police problem, researchers must penetrate the official smokescreen and observe directly the social action in social situations which, in the last analysis, defines police work.

That this is not easy is something of an understatement. As a personal example, I negotiated with over twenty urban police departments for well over a year before finally gaining access to one of



them in order to conduct a rather small scale and low profile study. In most cases, I was flatly refused with little or no explanation. Some departments, however, accepted a modified version of my study (consisting solely of attitude questionnaires) while refusing the proposed participant-observation portion of the research on a number of inventive idiosyncratic grounds (e.g., the study would be "too dangerous", "too time consuming," "illegal", "violate the command principle", etc.). Such evasions illustrate the concern placed by police administrators upon, as they claim, "protecting the integrity of their department".

While observation of the police in naturally occurring situations is difficult, lengthy and often threatening, it is imperative. Unfortunately, most research to date relies almost exclusively upon interview-questionnaire data (e.g., Bayley and Mendleson, 1969; Wilson, 1968), official statistics (e.g., Webster, 1970; President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice, 1967) or broad-ranging attitude surveys (e.g., Sterling, 1972; McNamara, 1964). The very few sustained observational studies have been concerned with specific aspects of police behavioral patterns (e.g., Skolnick, 1966--Vice activities; Reiss, 1971--Police-Citizen contracts; Bittner, 1967; Cicourel, 1967--Police encounters with "skid row alcoholics" and juveniles, respectively). This is not to say these diverse investigations are without merit. Indeed, without such studies we would not



have even begun to see beneath the occupational shield. Yet, the paucity of indepth police-related research--especially from the "outsider" perspective discussed above--represents a serious gap in our knowledge of a critical social establishment.

In particular, the process of "becoming" a police officer has been neglected.<sup>3</sup> What little data we presently have related to the police socialization process comes from either the work devoted to certain hypothesized dimensions of the police "personality" (e.g., dogmatism, authoritarianism, cynicism, alienation, etc.) or cross-sectional snapshots of police attitudes toward their public audiences. Using a dramaturgic metaphor, these studies have concentrated upon the description of the actors, stage setting, and "on stage" performance of the police production. Little attention has been paid to the orientation of the performers to their particular role viewed from a "backstage" perspective. Clearly, for any performance to materialize there must be casting sessions, rehearsals, directors, stage-hands and some form(s) of compensation provided the actors to insure their continued performance.

More generally, organizational socialization refers to the process by which a member learns the values, norms and requisite behavior which enable him to participate as a member of an organization. Organizational socialization also implies a man may be forced to relinquish certain attitudes, values and behaviors. Schein (1968) suggested that this process results in a "psychological contract" linking



the goals of the individual to the constraints and purposes of the organization. In a sense, this "psychological contract" is actually a modus vivendi between the individual and the organization representing the outcomes of the socialization process.

The following section briefly outlines the prominent features of the organizational socialization process endured by rookie patrolmen and describes the characteristic response to this process. The data for this truncated analysis are drawn from a participant-observational study I conducted over a period of nine months in Union City.<sup>4</sup> The focus is upon describing the development of the patrolman's particularistic occupational frame of reference. Consistent with my earlier remarks, only by specifying the "outsider's" perspective (in this case the police themselves) can we begin to understand fully the social meaning and function of his behavior.

Recognizing that to some degree organizational socialization occurs at all career stages, this paradigm focuses exclusively upon the individual recruit's entry into the organization. It is during the breaking-in period that the organization may be thought to be most persuasive, for the person has few guidelines to direct his behavior and has little, if any, organizationally based support for his "vulnerable selves" which may be the object of influence. Support for this position comes from a wide range of studies indicating that early organizational learning is a major determinant of one's later organizationally-relevant beliefs, attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Schein, 1968, 1962,





1961; Lortie, 1968; Berlew and Hall, 1966; Evan, 1963; Hughes, 1958; Dornbush, 1955). Essentially, the theory suggests that when the neophyte first enters an organization that portion of his lifespace corresponding to specific role demands of the organization is blank. Depending on a person's general values and desires, he may feel a strong need to define the expectations of others (i.e., the organization, the peer-group, the supervisor, etc.) and develop constructs relating himself to these expectations. One researcher has called this process building a "mental map" of the organization (Avery, 1968).

The Making of a Policeman: A Paradigm:

The underlying theme of the following discussion is simply that police work must be viewed as an occupation within occupations--that is, one which shares the same essential ingredients as any other job in this society. Although a policeman must cope with more demands, more pressures and more hostility than, say, the manager, the schoolteacher, or the factory worker; a neophyte policeman learns the particular behavior patterns and supportive sentiments in much the same manner as any new member of an organization. However, unlike some occupations where a sort of individualistic "Robinson Crusoe" model holds (e.g., schoolteaching), the socialization of police officers follows a rather well defined path managed closely by police administrators. Furthermore, the critical sequence of events involved in recruit socialization appears to be quite similar from department to department.<sup>5</sup>



For purposes here, the police recruit's initiation into the organizational setting shall be treated as if it occurred in four discrete stages. While these stages are only analytically distinct, they do serve as useful markers for describing the route traversed by the recruit. The sequence is related to the pre-entry, admittance, change and continuance phases of the organizational socialization process and are labeled here as choice, introduction, encounter and metamorphosis respectively.

(Pre-entry: Choice)

What sort of young man is attracted to and selected for a police career? The literature notes that police work seems to attract local, family oriented, working-class whites, interested primarily in the security and salary aspects of the occupation. Importantly, the authoritarian syndrome which has popularly been ascribed to persons selecting police careers has not been supported by empirical study. Generally, the available research supports the contention that the police occupation is viewed by the recruits as simply one job of many and considered roughly along the same dimensions as any job choice.

While my research can add little to the above picture, several qualifications are in order which perhaps provide a greater understanding of the particular choice process. First, the security and salary aspects of the police job have probably been overrated. Through interviews and experience with Union City recruits, a rather pervasive "meaningful work" theme is apparent as a major factor in job choice.



Virtually all recruits alluded to the "opportunity" afforded by a police career to perform in a role which was perceived as "consequential" or "important to society". One articulate recruit, a college graduate, stated:

"The principal motivating factor in my choice of job was the opportunity to make a contribution to the welfare of the community . . . in this field I really have an opportunity to achieve something worthwhile with my life".

While such altruistic motives may be subject to social desirability considerations or other biasing factors, it is my feeling that these high expectations of community service are an important element in the choice process.

Second, the out-of-doors and presumably adventurous qualities of police work (as depicted by the popular media) were perceived by the recruits as among the more influential factors attracting them to the job. With few exceptions, the novice policemen had worked several jobs since completing high school and were particularly apt to stress the benefits of working a "non-routine" job.

Third, the screening factor associated with police selection is a dominating aspect of the socialization process. From the filling out of the application blank at City Hall to the telephone call which informs a potential recruit of his acceptance into the department, the individual passes through a series of events which serve to impress



an aspiring policeman with a sense of being accepted into an "elite" or "top notch" organization. Perhaps some men originally took the qualifying examination for patrolman lightly, but it is unlikely many men proceeded through the entire screening process--often taking up to six months or more--without becoming committed seriously to a police career. As such, the various selection devices, if successfully surmounted, increase the person's self-esteem, as well as, buttress his occupational choice. Thus, this anticipatory stage tends to strengthen the neophyte's evaluation of the police organization as an important place to work.

Finally, as in most organizations, the police department is depicted to individuals who have yet to take the oath of office in its most favorable light. A potential recruit is made to feel as if he were important and valued by the organization. Furthermore, virtually all recruitment occurs via generational or friendship networks involving police officers and prospective recruits. Hence, the individual receives personalized encouragement and support which helps sustain his interest during the arduous screening procedure. Such links begin to attach the would-be policeman to the organization long before he actually joins.

To summarize, most policemen have not chosen their career casually. They enter the department with a high degree of normative identification with what they perceive to be the goals and values of the organization. At least in Union City, the police department was able to





attract and select men who entered the organization with a reservoir of positive attitudes toward hard work and a strong level of organizational support. What happens to the recruit and his associates when he is introduced to the occupation at the police academy is where attention is now directed.

(Admittance: Introduction)

The individual usually feels upon swearing allegiance to the department, city, state and nation that "he's finally made it". However, the department instantaneously and somewhat rudely informs him that until he has served his probationary period he may be severed from the membership rolls at any time without warning, explanation or appeal. It is perhaps ironic that in a period of a few minutes, a person's position vis-a-vis the organization can be altered so dramatically. Although some aspects of this phenomenon can be found in all organizations, in the paramilitary environment of the police world, the shift is particularly illuminating to the recruit.

For most urban police recruits, the first real contact with the police subculture occurs at the Academy. Surrounded by forty to fifty contemporaries, the recruit is introduced to the harsh and often arbitrary discipline of the organization. Absolute obedience to departmental rules, rigorous physical training, dull lectures devoted to various technical aspects of the occupation and a ritualistic concern for detail characterize the Academy. Only the recruit's classmates aid his struggle to avoid punishments and provide him an outlet from the long days. A



recruit soon learns that to be one minute late to a class, to utter a careless word in formation, or to be "caught" walking when he should be running may result in a "gig" or "demerit" costing a man an extra day of work or the time it may take to write a long essay on, say, "the importance of keeping a neat appearance."

Wearing a uniform which distinguishes the novices from a "real" policemen, recruits are expected to demonstrate group cohesion in all aspects of academy life. The training staff actively promotes solidarity through the use of group rewards and punishments, identifying garments for each recruit class, interclass competition and cajoling the newcomers--at every conceivable opportunity--to "show some unity".<sup>6</sup> Predictably, such tactics work--partial evidence is suggested by the well-attended academy class reunions held year after year in the department. To most veteran officers, their police academy experiences resulted in a career-long source of identification. It is no exaggeration to state that the "in-the-same-boat" collective consciousness which arises when groups are processed serially through a harsh set of experiences was as refined in the Union City Police Department as in other institutions such as military academies, fraternities or medical schools.

The formal content of the training academy is almost exclusively weighted in favor of the more technical aspects of police work. A few outside speakers are invited to the academy (usually during the last few weeks of training), but the majority of class time is filled by departmental personnel describing the more mundane features of the



occupation. To a large degree, the formal academy consists of a didactic sort of instrumentally-oriented training. As such, feigning attention to lectures on, for example, "the organization of the Administrative Services Bureau" or "state and local traffic codes" is a major task for the recruits.

However, the academy also provides the recruit with an opportunity to begin learning or, more properly, absorbing the tradition which typifies the department. The novices' overwhelming eagerness to hear what police work is "really like" results in literally hours upon hours of "war stories" (alternatively called "sea stories" by a few officers) told at the discretion of the many instructors. One recruit, when asked about what he hoped to learn in the Academy, responded as follows:

"I want them to tell me what police work is all about. I could care less about the outside speakers or the guys they bring out here from upstairs who haven't been on the street for the last twenty years. What I want is for somebody who's gonna level with us and really give the lowdown on how we're supposed to survive out there."

By observing and listening closely to police stories and style, the individual is exposed to a partial "organizational history" which details certain personalities, past events, places and implied relationships which the recruit is expected eventually to learn. And it



is largely through "war stories" that the department's history is conveyed. Throughout the Academy, a recruit is exposed to particular instructors who relate caveats concerning the area's notorious criminals, sensational crimes, social-geographical peculiarities and political structure. Certain charismatic departmental personalities are described in detail. Past events--notably the shooting of police officers--are recreated and informal analyses passed-on. The following excerpt from a criminal law lecture illustrates some of these concerns.

"I suppose you guys have heard of Lucky Baldwin?

If not, you sure will when you hit the streets.

Baldwin happens to be the biggest burglar still operating in this town. Every guy in this department from patrolman to chief would love to get him and make it stick. We've busted him about ten times so far, but he's got a smartass lawyer and money so he always beats the rap . . . If I ever get a chance to pinch the SOB, I'll do it my way with my thirty-eight and spare the city the cost of a trial."

The correlates of this history are mutually-held perspectives toward certain classes of persons, places and things which are the "objectives reality" of police work. Critically, when "war stories" are presented, discipline within the recruit class is relaxed. The rookies are allowed to share laughter and tension-relieving quips with





the veteran officers. A general atmosphere of camaraderie is maintained. The near lascivious enjoyment accompanying these informal respites from academy routine serve to establish congeniality and solidarity with the experienced officers in what is normally a rather harsh and uncomfortable environment. Clearly, this is the material of which memories are made.

Outside the classroom, the recruits spend endless hours discussing nuances and implications of "war stories" and collective understandings begin to develop. Via such experiences, the meaning and emotional reality of police work starts to take shape for the individual. In a sense, by vicariously sharing the exploits of his predecessors, the newcomer gradually builds a common language and shared set of interests which will attach him to the organization until he too has police experience to relate.

Despite these important breaks in formality, the recruit's early perceptions of policing are overshadowed by the submissive and often degrading role they are expected to play in the academy. Long, monotonous hours of class time are required, a seemingly eternal set of examinations are administered, meaningless assignments consume valuable "off-duty" time, various mortifying events are institutionalized rituals of academy life(e.g., each week, a class "asshole" was selected and received a "trophy" depicting a gorilla



dressed as a policeman) and relatively sharp punishments enacted for breaches of academy regulations. The multitude of academy rules makes it highly unlikely that any recruit can complete the training course unscathed. The following Training Division report illustrates the arbitrary nature of the dreaded "gigs" issued during the academy phase.

"You were observed displaying un-officer like conduct in an academy class. You openly yawned (without making any effort to minimize or conceal the fact), (this happened twice), you were observed looking out the window constantly, and spent time with your arms lying across your desk. You will report to Sergeant Smith in the Communications Division for an extra three hours of duty on August 15." (parentheses theirs)

The main result of such "stress" training is that the recruit soon learns it is his peer group rather than the "brass" which will support him and which he, in turn, must support. For example, the newcomers adopt "covering" tactics to shield the tardy colleague, develop "cribbing" techniques to pass exams and become proficient at constructing consensual ad hoc explanations of a fellow-recruit's mistake. Furthermore, the long hours, new friends and ordeal aspects of the recruit school serve to detach the newcomer from his old attitudes and acquaintances. In short, the academy impresses upon



the recruit that he must now identify with a new group--his fellow officers. That this process is not complete, however, is illustrated by the experience of one recruit during this last week of training--before his introduction to the street. This particular recruit told his classmates the following:

"Last night as I was driving home from the academy  
I stopped to get some gas . . .As soon as I shut  
off the engine some dude comes running up flapping  
his arms and yelling like crazy about being robbed.  
Here I am sitting in my car with my gun on and the  
ole buzzer (badge) staring him right in the face. . .  
Wow!. . .I had no idea what to do; so I told him  
to call the cops and got the hell away from there.  
What gets me is that it didn't begin to hit me that  
I WAS A COP until I was about a mile away."  
(parenthesis mine)

To this researcher, the academy training period serves to prepare the recruits to alter their initially high, but unrealistic occupational expectations. Through the methods described above, the novices begin to absorb the subcultural ethos and to "think like policemen". As a fellow recruit stated at the end of the academy portion of training:

"There's sure more to this job than I first thought.  
They expect us to be dogcatchers, lawyers, marriage



counsellors, boxers, firemen, doctors, baby-sitters,  
race-car drivers and still catch a crook occassionally.

There's no way we can do all that crap. They're nuts!"

Finally, as in other highly regulated social systems, the initiate learns that the formal rules and regulations are applied inconsistently. What is sanctioned in one case with a "gig" is ignored in another case. To the recruits, academy rules become behavioral prescriptions which are to be coped with formally, but informally dismissed. The newcomer learns that when "The Department" notices his behavior, it is usually to administer a punishment, not a reward. The solution to this collective predicament is to "stay low and avoid trouble".

(Change: Encounter)

Following the classroom training period, a newcomer is introduced to the complexities of the "street" through his Field Training Officer (hereafter referred to as the FTO). It is during this period of apprenticeship-like socialization that the "reality shock" encompassing full recognition of being a policeman is likely to occur. Through the eyes of his experienced FTO, the recruit learns the ins and outs of the police role. Here he learns what kinds of behavior are appropriate and expected of a patrolman within his social setting. His other instructors in this phase are almost exclusively his fellow patrolmen working the same precinct and shift. While his sergeant may occassionally offer tips on how to handle himself on the "street", the supervisor





is more notable for his absense than for his presence. When the sergeant does seek out the recruit, it is probably to inquire as to how many hazardous traffic violations the "green pea" had written that week or to remind the recruit to keep his hat on while out of the patrol car. As a matter of formal policy in Union City, the department expected the FTO to handle all recruit uncertainties. This traditional feature of police work--patrolmen training patrolmen--insures continuity from class to class of police officers regardless of the content of the academy instruction. In large measure, the flow of influence from one generation to another accounts for the remarkable stability of the pattern of police behavior.

It was my observation that the recruit's reception into the Patrol Division was one of consideration and warm welcome. As near as interviewing and personal experience can attest, there was no hazing or rejection of the recruit by veteran officers. In all cases, the recruits were fully accepted into the on-going police system with good-natured tolerance and much advice. If anyone in the department was likely to react negatively to the recruits during their first few weeks on patrol, it was the supervisor and not the on-line patrolmen. The fraternal-like regard shown the rookie by the experienced officers stands in stark contrast to the stern greeting he received at the police academy. The newcomer quickly is bombarded with "street wise" patrolmen assuring him that the police academy was simply an experience all officers endure



and has little, if anything, to do with "real police work". Consequently, the academy experiences for the recruits stand symbolically as their "rites de passage", permitting them access to the occupation. That the experienced officers confirm their negative evaluation of the academy heightens the assumed similarities among the rookies and veterans and serves to facilitate the recruits' absorption into the division. As an FTO noted during my first night on patrol:

"I hope the academy didn't get to you. Its something we all have to go through. A bunch of bullshit as far as I can tell . . . I guess its like an initiation ceremony. Since you got through it OK, you get to find out what it's like out here. You'll find out mighty fast that it ain't nothing like they tell you at the academy."

During the protracted hours spent on patrol with his FTO, the recruit is instructed as to the "real nature" of police work. To the neophyte, the first few weeks on patrol are an extremely trying period. The recruit is slightly fearful and woefully ill prepared for both the routine and eccentricities of "real" police work. While he may know the criminal code and the rudimentaries of arrest, the fledgling patrolman is perplexed and certainly not at ease in their application. For example, a two-day veteran told the following story to several of his academy associates.



"We were down under the bridge where the fags hang out and spot this car that looked like nobody was in it. . . Frank puts the spot on it and two heads pop up. He tells me to watch what he does and keep my mouth shut. So I follow him up to the car and just kind of stand around feeling pretty dumb. Frank gives 'em a blast of shit and tells the guy sitting behind the wheel he's under arrest. The punk gets out of the car snivelling and I go up to him and start putting the cuffs on. Frank says, 'just take him back to the car and sit on him while I get the dope on his boyfriend here.' So I kind of direct him back to the car and stick him in the backseat and I get in the front. . . While Frank's filling out a FIR (Field Investigation Report) on the other guy, the little pansy in the backseat's carrying on about his wife and kids like you wouldn't believe. I'm starting to feel sorta sorry for arresting him. Anyway, Frank finishes filling out the FIR and tells the other guy to get going and if he ever sees him again he'll beat the holy shit out of him. Then he comes back to the car



and does the same number on the other fag. After we drove away, I told Frank I thought we'd arrested somebody. He laughed his ass off and told me that that's the way we do things out here." (parentheses mine)

To a recruit, the whole world seems new and from his novel point of view it is. Like a visitor from a foreign land, the daily events are perplexing and present a myriad of operational difficulties. At first, the squawk<sup>w/</sup> of the police radio transmits only meaningless static; the streets appear to be a maze through which only an expert could maneuver; the use of report forms seems inconsistent and confusing; encounters with a hostile public leave him cold and apprehensive; and so on. Yet, next to him in the patrol unit is his "partner" a veteran. Hence, the FTO is the answer to most of the "breaking-in" dilemmas. It is commonplace for the rookie to never make a move without first checking with his FTO. By watching, listening and mimicking, the neophyte policeman learns how to deal with the objects of his occupation--the traffic violater, the "hippie", the drunk; the "brass" and the criminal justice complex itself. One veteran reflected on his early patrol experiences as follows:

"On this job, your first partner is everything.

He tells you how to survive on the job. . .how

to walk, how to stand, and how to speak and how





to think and what to say and see."

Clearly, it is during the FTO phase of the recruits' career that he is most susceptible to attitude change. The newcomer is self-conscious and truly in need of guidelines. A whole folklore of tales, myths and legends surrounding the department is communicated to the recruit by his fellow-officers--conspicuously by his FTO. Through these anecdotes--dealing largely with "mistakes" or "flubs" made by policemen--the recruit begins to adopt the perspectives of his more experienced colleagues. He becomes aware that "nobody's perfect" and, as if to reify his police academy experiences, he learns that to be protected from his own mistakes, he must protect others. One such yarn told to me by a two-year veteran illustrates this point.

"Grayson had this dolly he'd been balling for quite a while living over on the north side. Well, it seemed like a quiet night so we cruise out of our district and over to the girl's house. I babysit the radio while Grayson goes inside. Wouldn't you know it, we get a emergency call right away. . . I start honking the horn trying to get the horny bastard out of there; he pays me no mind, but the neighbors get kind of irritated at some cop waking up the nine-to-fivers. Some asshole calls the station and pretty soon Sparky and Jim show up to



find out what's happening. They're cool but their Sergeant ain't, so we fabricate this insane story 'bout Sparky's girlfriend living there and how he always toots the horn when passing. Me and Grayson beat it back to our district and show up about 45 minutes late on our call. Nobody ever found out what happened, but it sure was close."

Critical to the practical learning process is the neophyte's own developing repertoire of experiences. These events are normally interpreted to him by his FTO and other veteran officers. Thus the "reality shock" of being "in on the action" is absorbed and defined by the recruit's fellow officers. As a somewhat typical example, one newcomer, at the prodding of his patrol partner, "discovered" that to explain police actions to a "civilian" invited disrespect. He explained:

"Keith was always telling me to be forceful, to not back down and to never try and explain the law or what we are doing to a civilian. I didn't really know what he was talking about until I tried to tell some kid why we have laws about speeding. Well, the more I tried to tell him about traffic safety, the angrier he got. I was lucky to just get his John Hancock on the citation. When I came back to the patrol car, Keith explains to me just where I'd gone wrong. You really



can't talk to those people out there, they just won't listen to reason."

In general, the first month or so on the "street" is an exciting and rewarding period for the recruit. For his FTO, however, it is a period of appraisal. While the recruit is busy absorbing a myraid of novel experiences, his partner is evaluating the newcomer's reaction to certain situations. Aside from assisting the recruit with the routines of patrol work, the training officer's main concern is in how the recruit will handle the "hot call"--the "in-progress" or "on-view" or "help the officer" situation which the experienced officer knows may result in "trouble". The "hot call" represents everything the policeman feels he is prepared for. In short, it calls for "police work." Such calls are anticipated by the patrolmen with both pleasure and anxiety and the recruit's performance on such calls is in a very real sense the "measure of the man". A Union City Sergeant described the "hot call" to me as follows:

"The hot call is why we're here; its our main reason for being in business. Like when somebody starts busting up a place, or some asshole's got a gun, or some idiot tries to knock off a cop. Basically, its the situation where you figure you may have to use the tools of your trade. Of course, some guys get a little shakey when these incidents come along, in fact, most



of us do if we're honest. But, you know deep down that this is why you're a cop and not pushing pencils somewhere. You've got to be tough on this job and situations like these separate the men from the boys. I know I'd never trust my partner until I'd seen him in action on a hot one."

While "hot calls" are relatively rare on a day-to-day basis, their occurrence signals a behavioral test for the recruit. To pass, he must have "balls". By placing himself in a vulnerable position and pluckily "backing-up" his FTO and/or other patrolmen, a recruit demonstrates his inclination to share the risks of police work. Through such events, a newcomer quickly makes a departmental reputation which will follow him for the remainder of his career.

The following series of FTO reports submitted to the Training Division denote graphically the importance of the above behavioral test. In this case, the unlucky recruit resigned after a series of bitter encounters with hostile veteran officers convinced him that he would receive little support or friendship if he chose to remain with the department.

Field Training Officer's Weekly Progress Reports

Week 1: "This report can not be given much credence.

The recruit has been with me only one day."

Week 2: "Recruit progressing well. Seems to have all

the necessary abilities to make a good officer."





Week 3: "Recruit showing a clear grasp of police function and continues to improve his skills."

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Week 6: "Cooperations, loyalty and judgement marked low specifically because of one instance where he froze while I was making an arrest resulting in an injury to myself (FTO sprained an ankle while in a tavern brawl with several patrons). Recruit seems unable to apply any of the skills taught in the academy. (parentheses mine)

Week 7: "Recruit resigned."

Although the above case study is an extreme case, it does illustrate the importance of "backing-up" fellow officers. At another level, testing the recruit's propensity to partake in the risks which accompany police work goes on continuously within the department. For example, several FTO's in Union City were departmental celebrities for their training techniques. One officer made it a ritual to have his recruit write parking citations in front of the local Black Panther Party headquarters. Another was prominent for requiring his recruit to "shake out" certain "trouble" bars in the rougher sections of town (i.e., check identifications, make cursory body searches and



possibly roust out customers, a la The French Connection). Less dramatic, but nonetheless as important, recruits' are appraised as to their speed getting out of the patrol car, their lack of hesitation when approaching a "suspicious person" or their willingness to lead the way up a darkened stairwell. The required behaviors vary from event to event; however, contingent upon the ex-post-facto evaluation of the situation (e.g., was a weapon involved? did the officers have to fight the suspect? how many other patrolmen were on the spot?) a novice makes his departmental reputation. While some FTO's promote these "climatic" events, most wait quietly for such situations to occur. Certainly varying definitions of appropriate behavior in these "knife edge" situations exist from patrolman to patrolman, but the critical and common element is the recruit's demonstrated willingness to place himself in a precarious position while assisting a "brother" officer. In the police world, such behavior is demanded.

Although data on such instances are inherently difficult to collect, it appears that the behaviorally-demonstrated commitment to one's fellow officers involved in such events is a particularly important stage in the socialization process. To the recruit, he has experienced a test and it provides him with the first of many shared experiences which he can relate to other officers. To the FTO, he has watched his man in a "police work" situation and now knows a great



deal more about his occupational companion.

Aside from the "back-up" test applied to all recruits, the other most powerful experience in a recruit's early days on patrol is his first arrest. Virtually all policemen can recall the individual, location and situation surrounding their first arrest. One five year veteran patrolman stated:

"That first arrest is really something. I guess that's because it's what we're supposedly out here for. . .

In my case, I'd been out for a couple of weeks but we hadn't done much. . . I think we'd made some chippies, like stand-ups, or DWI's, but my partner never let me handle the arrest part. Then one night he tells me that if anything happens, I've got to handle it. Believe me, I'll never forget that first arrest, even if it was only a scumbag wino who had just fallen through a window. . . I suppose I can remember my first three or four arrests, but after that they just start to blur together."<sup>7</sup>

It is such occurrences that determine the recruit's success in the department. Yet, to some extent, both the "back up" test and the first arrest are beyond the direct control of the newcomer. The fact that they both take place at the discretion of the FTO underscores the orderliness of the socialization process. In effect, these



"climatic" situations graphically demonstrate to the recruit his new status and role within the department. And after passing through this regulated sequence of events, he can now say, "I am a cop!"

(Continuance: Metamorphosis)

This section is concerned broadly with what Becker et al. (1961) labelled the "final perspective". As such, the interest is upon the characteristic response recruits' eventually demonstrate regarding their occupational and organizational setting. Again, the focus is upon the perspectives the initiates come to hold of the "backstage" aspect of their career.

As noted earlier, one of the major motivating factors behind the recruit's decision to become a policeman was the adventure or romance he felt would characterize the occupation. Yet, the young officer soon learns the work consists primarily of performing routine service and administrative tasks--the proverbial clerk in a patrol car. This finding seems well-established in the pertinent literature and my observations confirm these reports (e.g., Wilson, 1968; Webster, 1970; Reiss, 1971). Indeed, a patrolman is predominately an "order taker"--a reactive member of a service organization. For example, most officers remarked that they never realized the extent to which they would be "married to the radio" until they had worked the "street" for several months.

Yet, there is an unpredictable side of the occupation and this





aspect can not be overlooked. In fact, it is the unexpected elements of working patrol that provide self-esteem and stimulation for the officers. This unpredictable feature of patrol work has too often been understated or disregarded by students of police behavior. To classify the police task as bureaucratically routine and monotonous ignores the psychological omnipresence of the potential "good pinch". It is precisely the opportunity to exercise his perceived police role that gives meaning to the occupational identity of patrolmen. Operationally, this does not imply patrolmen are always alert and working hard to make the "good pinch". Rather, it simply suggests that the unexpected is one of the few aspects of the job that helps maintain the patrolman's self-image of performing a worthwhile, exciting and dangerous task. To some degree, the anticipation of the "hot call" allows for the crystallization of his personal identity as a policeman. One Union City patrolman with ten years experience commented succinctly on this feature. He noted:

"Most of the time being a cop is the dullest job in the world. . . what we do is pretty far away from the stuff you see on Dragnet or Adam 12. But, what I like about this job and I guess it's what keeps me going, is that you never know what's gonna happen out there. For instance, me and my partner will be working a Sunday graveyard shift way out in the north end and



expecting everything to be real peaceful and quiet like; then, all of a sudden, hell breaks loose. . . Even on the quietest nights, something interesting usually happens."

Reiss (1971) noted perceptually the "atypical routine" enjoyed by patrolmen. After examining the police "straight eight"--the tour duty--he stated:

"No tour of duty is typical except in the sense that the modal tour of duty does not involve the arrest of a person." (p. 19)

Still, one of the ironies of police work is that recruits were attracted to the organization by and large via the unrealistic expectation that the work role would be non-routine and exciting. Yet, in the "real world" activities of policing, such activities are few and far between. Once a recruit has mastered the various technical and social skills of routine policing (e.g., "learning the district", developing a set of mutual understandings with his partner, knowing how and when to fill out the plethora of various report forms, etc.), there is little left to learn about his occupation which can be transferred by formal or informal instruction. As Westley (1951) pointed out, the recruit must then sit back and wait, absorbing the subjective side of police work and let his experiences accumulate. The wife of one recruit noted this frustrating characteristic of police work.



She said:

"It seems to me that being a policeman must be very discouraging. They spend all that time teaching the men to use the gun and the club and then they make them go out and do very uninteresting work."

It has been suggested that for a newcomer to any occupation, "coping with the emotional reality of the job" is the most difficult problem to resolve (Schein, 1962). In police work, the coping behavior appears to consist of the "learning of complacency". Since the vast majority of time is spent in tasks other than "real" police work, there is little incentive for performance. In other words, the young patrolman discovers the most satisfying solution to the labyrinth of hierarchy, the red tape and paperwork, the myriad of rules and regulations and the "dirty work" which characterizes the occupation is to adopt the group norm stressing "staying out of trouble". And the best way in which he can stay out of trouble is to minimize the set of activities he pursues. One Union City veteran patrolman explained:

"We are under constant pressure from the public to account for why we did or didn't do this or that. It's almost as if the public feels it owns us. You become supersensitive to criticisms from the public, almost afraid to do anything. At the same time,



the brass around here never gives a straight-forward answer about procedures to anyone and that creates alot of discontent. All communication comes down. But, try and ask a question and it gets stopped at the next level up. It gets to the point where you know that if you don't do anything at all, you won't get in trouble."

In a similar vein, another veteran officer put it somewhat more bluntly. He suggested caustically:

"The only way to survive on this job is to keep from breaking your ass. . . if you try too hard you're sure to get in trouble. Either some civic-minded creep is going to get outraged and you'll wind up with a complaint in your file; or the high and mighty in the department will come down on you for breaking some rule or something and you'll get your pay docked."

These quotations suggest that disenchantment has two edges. One, the police with the general public--which has been well-substantiated in the literature; and two, the disenchantment with the police system itself. In short, a recruit begins to realize (through proverb, example and his own experience) it is his relationship with his fellow-officers which protects his interests and allows him to continue on the job--without their support he would be lost.





In most ways, the patrolmen represent what Goffman (1959) calls a team. In Goffmanesque, a "team" is:

"A set of individuals whose intimate co-operation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained." (p. 104)

The situational definition to be maintained in the patrol setting is that "all-is-going-well-and-there-are-no-problems". The covert rule for patrolmen is to never draw attention to one's activities. An analysis I conducted on the written weekly FTO progress reports illustrates this point convincingly. Of over 300 report forms, only one contained an even slightly negative evaluation--that case has been discussed previously. Uniformly, all forms were characterized by high praise for the recruit. The topics the FTOs chose to elaborate upon were typified by such concerns as: the recruit's driving skill; the recruit's pleasing personality; the recruit's stable home life; and so on. In fact, vast majority of reports contained virtually no reference to the types of activities engaged in by the recruit. The point is simply that in only one case was an FTO report filed which might result in departmental attention. It should be clear that such behavior does not pass unnoticed by the recruit. Indeed, he learns rapidly the importance and value of his "team" as well as the corresponding definition of the police situation.

A further example of the manner in which the "team" works is given below. It is concerned with an incident which occurred to a



recruit during his second month on the "street". The material is quoted from my field notes:

". . .approximately 12:30am we were requested by another unit to meet in the parking lot behind the Crazy Horse (a local nightclub). The other unit was working an adjacent district and the officer was apparently working a solo shift. . .We parked and waited. After a brief delay, the other officer approached our vehicle on foot, carrying a clipboard. Talking to Marty, David's FTO, he stated that there had been some trouble and he'd 'coldcocked' some 'obnoxious little nigger'. . .This officer also stated that he'd 'sluffed' a knife into the other party's coat after an ambulance had "taken him away". The officer said he expected some shit from the department unless we'd sign a report essentially stating that we'd seen the man causing a disturbance earlier in the night. This other officer then handled a blank report form to Marty and asked him to sign. Marty signed first then handed the clipboard to David and David signed. . . At no time did we observe the reputed offender. The solo officer told us he'd type in the report and explain the details to us later." (October 23, 1970)



While this is only one of six similar incidents observed by this researcher (falsification of information), it was without question the most serious. While the recruit involved expressed certain misgivings to me at a later meeting, it was apparent that if he wished to continue as a "team" member of good standing, he had little choice but to sign the report form. It would seem that by increasing the recruit's vulnerability to sanction, the importance and worth of the "team" is made quite salient to the newcomer.

As others have observed, the rules and regulations which typify police departments are so numerous and patently unenforceable that no one will (or could) obey all the canons of "professional" conduct (Reiss, 1971; Radano, 1968; Skolnick, 1966). This situation was evidenced in Union City where, for example, patrolmen were supposedly prohibited from: smoking in public, borrowing money from another police officer; criticizing orders from superior officers; seeking notoriety; excessive drinking off-duty; accepting any "gratuity" regardless of how small; and so on. The result of such departmental proscription--which delve deep into a patrolman's private life--is to place the individual in great need of colleague support. The existence of such regulations--associated with their rather widespread violation<sup>8</sup>--makes most officers extremely susceptible to departmental discipline. Consequently, the recruit again learns the value of the "team".

To summarize, the adjustment of a newcomer in police departments is one which follows the line of least resistance. By becoming similar in



sentiment and behavior to his peers, the recruit avoids censure by the department, his supervisor and, most important, his "brother officers". Furthermore, since the occupational rewards are to be found primarily in the unusual situation which calls for "real" police work, the logical situational solution is for the officers to organize their activities in such a way as to minimize the likelihood of being sanctioned by any of their audiences. The low visibility of the patrolman's role vis a vis the department allows for such a response. Thus, the pervasive adjustment is epitomized in the "lie low, hang loose and don't expect too much" advice frequently heard within the Union City Police Department. This overall picture would indicate that the following tip given to me by a Union City veteran represents a very astute analysis of how to insure continuance in the police world. He suggested:

"There's only two things you gotta know around here.  
First, forget everything you've learned in the academy  
'cause the street's where you'll learn to be a cop;  
and second, being first don't mean shit around here.  
Take it easy, that's our motto."

The above characterization of the recruit socialization process, while necessarily a drastic condensation of a much more complex and interdependent process, does delineate the more important aspects of becoming a policeman. Furthermore, this descriptive narrative hints





that many of the recent attempts to alter or reform police behavior are likely to meet with frustration and failure. It is to this issue that brief consideration is now given.

### III. Police Socialization: A Coda for Reformers.

The basic premise upon which this look at adult socialization rested was simply that when individuals are introduced into any social system they are subject to a powerful process of influence. Regardless whether this socialization is undertaken consciously or unconsciously, collectively or singularly, formally or informally, it represents perhaps the most important factor contributing to the organization's institutional stability and character. Ultimately, the fashion by which new members become linked to the on-going system determines the organization's continuity of mission, social structure and climate, normative orientation and adaptive abilities.

The thrust of my research would indicate that reform programs which are not aimed specifically at the more salient features of the recruit socialization process are unlikely to produce much change within the police society. Importantly, the traditional manner in which a neophyte "learns the streets" determines the character of the department. To alter this aspect of police training calls for drastic reform in the entire institution. For example, recruits would necessarily be insulated from most veteran officers during their early months or perhaps years in the organization; behavior would be reinforced by



socially meaningful support within the department; reward mechanisms would be revamped to provide organizational recognition of alternative behaviors; the nature of the patrol task would be presented accurately to both the recruit and to the public at large; and the reoccurring strain upon policemen to accept the "outsider" position would be modified by assimilating the novice within the community he serves. That these "reforms" are difficult, if not impossible, is the supreme understatement.

As this paper has attempted to suggest, the intelligibility of social events requires that they always be viewed in a context which extends both spatially and in time. Relatedly, social actors must be granted rationality for their behavior. In the case of urban police our perspective specifically draws attention to the situational imperatives faced by recruit patrolmen. Is it any wonder that faced with impossible demands and a pariah-like social position, our police recoil behind a blue curtain? Indeed, we seem to have reached what R. D. Laing (1968) calls the "theoretical limit of institutions". According to Laing, this paradoxical situation is characterized by a system which, when viewed as a collective, behaves irrationally, yet is populated by members whose everyday behavior is imminently rational.

Most police observers view the behavior of individual patrolmen as a "problem" for the department or society, not visa versa. I have, in a small way, tried to correct this bias by describing the



point of view of the entering recruit. This emphasizes the intelligibility of the newcomer's actions as he works out solutions to his unique problems. In short, we "looked-up" at the nature of the network above the recruit rather than using the usual approach which, in the past, has "looked-down" on the "outsider" from the more comfortable position of the conventional mores and values of society. Perhaps this approach indicates to the reader that our police are indeed trapped in a dilemma.

In a very real sense, the purpose of this brief coda is to suggest a limit upon the extent to which the police can be expected to solve their own dilemma. Regardless of how well-educated, well-equipped or "professional" the patrolman may become, his normative position and task within society will remain unchanged. In this perspective, the characteristic response of police officers to their present situation is indeed both rational and functional. Clearly, the police "sub-culture"--like subcultures surrounding bricklayers, lawyers or social workers--will probably exist in the even most "reformed" of departments. To change the police without changing the police role in society is as futile as the labors of Sisyphus.

The long range goal should be a structural redefinition of the police task and to determine ways in which the external control principle--so central to the rule of law--may be strengthened. Of course, ways must be found to make the policeman's lot somewhat more



tolerable, both to him and to the general citizenry. Organizational change can aid this process by designing training programs which place less stress on the apprenticeship relationship. However, it is doubtful that without profound alterations in the definition and structural arrangement of the police task (and in the implied values such arrangements support) significant change is possible. It would seem that only by concentrating less on the individual policeman and more on the external methods for increasing police accountability can greater control of the arbitrary use of police power be gained.

Plans to increase the therapeutic and operational effectiveness of police institutions by "in-house" techniques must be judged in terms of what is being done now and what might be done--and, given the features of the police institution as described here, the difference is painfully small. The particular pattern of police practices is a response to the demands of the larger complex and, as such, reflects the values and norms prevalent throughout society. The extent to which the police system undermines the rule of law; the extent to which the public is willing to alter the "crime fighter" image of police; the extent to which the police bureaucracy will allow change; and ultimately, the extent to which the police system as presently constructed can operate under strict public accounting--these are the major issues confronting the police and not the degree to which the police can be "professionalized".





NOTES

1. The use of the term "outsider" in the above context is not intended to invidiously portray the police. Rather, the term simply connotes the widespread conviction carried by the police themselves that they are, of necessity, somehow "different" set-off from the larger society. Such a perspective emphasizes the necessity to view the world from the eyes of the "outsider"--a perspective which ideally is empathetic but neither sympathetic or judgmental.
2. All police quotes, unless otherwise stated, are taken from this researcher's field study. For further discussion, see Van Maanen, 1972.
3. One exception is Westly's (1951) insightful observational study of a midwestern police department. However, his research was devoted mainly to the description of the more salient sociological features of the police occupation and was concerned only peripherially with the "learning process" associated with the police role.
4. Union City is a pseudonym for a sprawling metropolitan area populated by more than one million persons. The police department employs well over 1,000 uniformed officers, has a traditional training program, provides a salary slightly above the national average and is organized in the classic pyrimidal arrangement.
5. This statement is based upon personal communication with police administrators and researchers, an extensive review with the police related literature, interviews conducted with police personnel from a number of different departments, and, most importantly, critical



readings of my work by policemen with experience in several departments. For a similar view noting the structural correspondence among recruit training programs, see Ahern, 1971; Niederhoffer, 1967; Berkeley, 1969.

6. Significantly, a recruit is not even allowed to carry a loaded weapon during the classroom portion of his academy training. He must wait until graduation night before being permitted to "load his weapon". To the recruit, such policies are demeaning. Yet, the policies "stigmatizing" the recruits-as-recruits (e.g., different uniforms, old and battered batons, allocation of special parking spaces, special scarfs and name plates, etc.) were exceedingly effective methods of impressing upon the recruits that they were members of a particular class and were not yet Union City Police Officers.

7. By "chippies", the officer was referring to "normal" arrests encountered frequently by patrolmen. Usually, a "chippie" is a misdemeanor arrest for something like drunkenness. The "chippie" crimes the officer noted in the quotation, "stand-ups" and "DWIs", refer to drunk-in-public and driving-while-intoxicated, respectively.

8. An indication of the frequency in which serious departmental rules are violated is provided by Reiss (1971). His team of field researchers reported that four out of every ten police officers who were observed during an eight hour shift, engaged in one or more violations of departmental rules. Serious violations of the rules were designated by the researcher to include: (1) drinking and sleeping



while on duty; (2) neglect of duty by unauthorized time away from duty for other than police business; and (3) falsification of information on police matters. Reiss's data is roughly comparable to my observations on a considerably smaller number of cases.



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